

ASP.NET in a Nutshell, Second Edition
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The .NET version of Active Server Pages (ASP.NET) is Microsoft's most recently promoted technology for building internet-based applications. Weighing in at nearly the mass of a notebook computer and squeaking in at just under the thousand page boundary, this nutshell book does an excellent job bringing programmers up to speed on an interesting and timely topic.

The book consists of three parts, each of which would make a formidable book on its own. Part one includes eleven chapters introducing ASP.NET. The table of contents, as well as the complete text of chapter six on user and custom server controls, is available at the book's web site. O'Reilly already publishes a book entitled *Programming ASP.NET*, but for those who are already familiar with the previous incarnation of ASP or with Microsoft's architecture for web applications, this part will have you quickly up and writing programs, if not running them. "Hello, world!" appears in chapter two. The program is short enough to be typed in notepad, but my installation of IIS (Microsoft's web server) would not run it. After replacing notepad with Visual Studio and searching the web high and low, I discovered that IIS must first be configured to run ASP.NET applications. The book, not being an IIS or .NET administration manual, omits the topic. One hint, aspnet_regiis.exe, might suffice.

Except for token cases, example programs are written in Visual Basic. This may dissatisfy C# programmers. Have patience and rename chapter 22 "Converting from VB to C# Syntax" instead of "C# to VB" and read it. Microsoft has altered VB to such an extent that it is practically C# for people who shun punctuation; it's not so bad! The example programs are written with limited line length to prevent word wrapping. This is the first time I've seen that degree of attention to detail. Chapter five covers the basics of built-in controls and validation, which are missing from the equivalent C# book. The examples are concise and to the point, unlike the run-on examples padding the page counts of other books.

Part two documents the eight classes whose instances are made available to each ASP.NET page automatically, the intrinsic classes. These are, of course, the objects most often required. For nearly every single property and method, an example is provided illustrating how to get or set the property or exercise the method. This part could nearly qualify as an "ASP.NET Examples in a Nutshell" book. To save space, each example is based on a simple template provided at the beginning of each chapter, so that only pertinent code appears afterwards. The template for each chapter is nearly identical, so it could be placed in the introduction, but each chapter is designed to be self-contained and so it is repeated.

The documentation for each class is arranged into categories: properties, collections, methods, and events. As far as I can tell, collections include properties that happen to refer to collections. Methods that return collections are placed alongside the other methods rather than collections. Although I think the VB examples are excellent, the VB-style documentation, especially for properties, began to irritate me. I hope the style is not indicative of VB programming practice. Here is an example with line breaks indicated by slashes: "PhysicalPath / stringvar =

Request.PhysicalPath / Returns a string containing the physical path to the requested file. / Parameter / stringvar / A string variable to receive the physical path.” It reads like code with mandatory comments. “PhysicalPath as String / Returns the physical path to the requested file” would more than suffice and use one third the lines. “Do VB programmers really consider the return value to be a parameter?” I kept asking.

Each entry in part two includes substantial, helpful notes which results in a reference section that can be read straight through, a rarity. If you do read it all, you will notice the repeated explanation of collection capabilities, which explicit documentation of ICollection would better handle, and a lack of distinction between the construction of an exception and the throwing of one. Ignore these distractions and read on. The last chapter of part two covers ASP.NET configuration settings in web.config files.

A comprehensive quick reference to the System.Web namespaces fills part three. It is a tribute to the reflective capabilities of .NET, since much of it can be generated automatically from the .NET assemblies. Ample commentary is provided, but this is not so much the straight read as the previous part. Syntax of method declarations is based on C# and this necessitates the chapter on converting C# to VB. Cross referencing of classes is excellent. Included are class hierarchies, subclasses, producers (returned-by) and consumers (passed-to), associated events, and more. The special index that follows identifies the namespace associated with a type, method, property, or field (i.e., public data member). A standard index to the entire book follows. About the only way to accelerate look-up would be to automate it with a computer, which makes me wonder why O’Reilly does not include a searchable CD with most of its nutshell books. For an alternative, see <http://safari.oreilly.com>.

The major competitor to this book is probably the reference documentation provided directly by Microsoft with Visual Studio or an MSDN subscription. This book is certainly recommendable to programmers without access to those sources. Even those who do have access will probably find part one particularly helpful and part two worthwhile. I certainly did.

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About the Reviewer

Besides working as a consultant, the author is attending a C# course at the University of Arizona and would like to point out that CSC 387, Developing Enterprise Web Applications, covers much of the material from this book and may be of interest to TCS members.